

# Picturing dialogues: exploring aesthetics, pace and rhythm

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# Picturing Dialogues

Exploring Aesthetics,  
Pace and Rhythm

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JONATHAN SHAW & MAARTEN VANVOLSEM









In many of the reflections on the relationship of photographic images to the subject of time, it is actually not the images as an object that is addressed but their depiction of time. For example, a modern day viewer, who in an almost natural flow would seek to re-animate the image sequences of Eadweard Muybridge's *Motion Studies* volumes. However, it is not the form of the images that encourages the viewer to do so, but human perception of the movement of bodies and society's comprehension of, and relationship to, image technology, in this case of moving images.

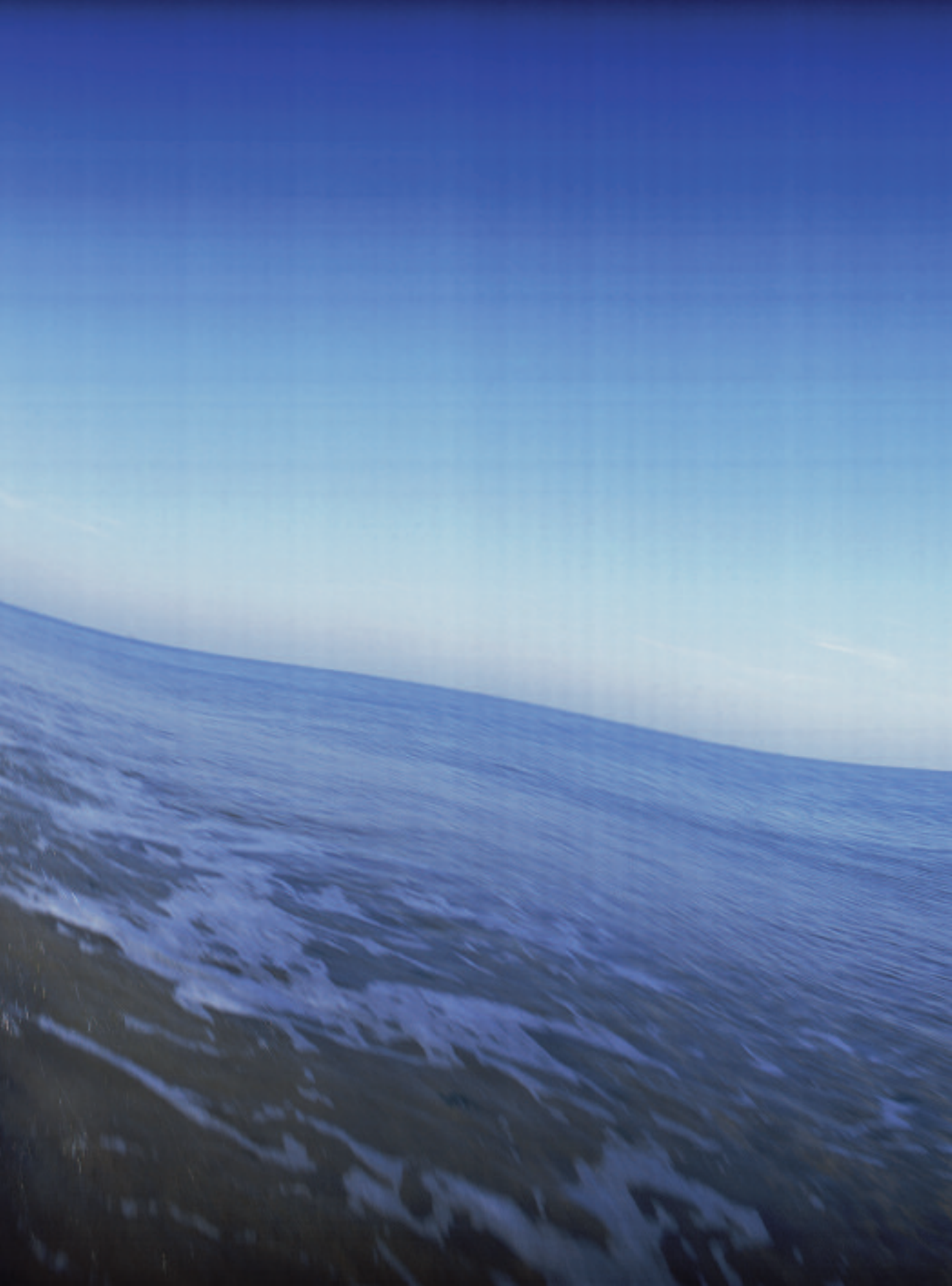
This section presents an articulation of ideas, principles and notions on photography and how, as a field, it manages to deal with time and communicate that concept within itself. This sequence of images, which has been collaboratively authored, seeks to offer our understanding and reflection of the relationship between image, narrative and time.

We are not interested in the precise reconstruction of movement, which has already been broken up and analysed. We are involved only in the area of movement which produces sensation, the memory of which still palpitates in our awareness.<sup>a</sup>

What is depicted on these pages is the consequence of a dialogue between two practitioners, Jonathan Shaw and Maarten Vansolsem. We were familiar with each others work before we met for the first time on the occasion of a seminar in Brussels in 2007. At that point we did not have an opportunity to discuss the ideas and motivations behind our work. For this 'Picturing dialogues' section we have therefore attempted to collaboratively author, some of the reflections on, and understanding of, our practices that have resulted from our extended conversations and discussions, through words and images.

In 1913 Anton Giulio Bragaglia published the Futurist Photodynamism manifesto. This manifesto despised the fields of cinematography and chronophotography, pronouncing a new ideal instead, one shared by ourselves, where photography has the ability to express a certain feeling of movement, a flux. Therefore, you will find two strands of quotation across the following pages, some are from our recorded conversations, others coming from Bragaglia's text. The manifesto itself offered a central place, a conduit and focus for our dialogues, and as such we have sought to embed them within the flow of this piece. Their purpose and function is not to relive the manifesto but to reuse it, to help us further understand our use of 'technique' and our way of expressing time and motion within the still photographic image.











Our work as much as it produces images, is dealing with the action we as artists make and the trace of this action that is left behind in the image.<sup>b</sup>

As such there is an interplay between the machine, the mechanics of the camera, the artist and their surroundings. Within the image we are seeking for a harmony between these three elements. What is depicted is not focused upon the reality of that which can be seen. It is the result of a process that, by collecting data over time, works differently from the human eye. It is a reality that can be lived, a time-frame, a 'specious present'.<sup>1</sup>

The key feature of our work then, is not the ideal exposure—the attempt to capture an image that is a perfect depiction of what we want to present within the constraints of the frame of one specific camera. Our work is about an event, an encounter and its sensation. Importantly, it is also this event that determines the length of the image frame, not the camera or any other commercial standard.<sup>b</sup>



Chronophotography could be compared with a clock on the face of which only the quarter-hours are marked, cinematography to one on which the minutes too are indicated, and Photodynamism to a third on which are marked not only the seconds, but also the intermovemental fractions existing in the passages between seconds. This becomes an almost infinitesimal calculation of movement. In fact it is only through our researches that it is possible to obtain a vision that is proportionate, in terms of the strength of the images, to the very tempo of their existence, and to the speed with which they have lived in a space and in us.<sup>9</sup>

These images reflect this sensation of being in a place and they communicate the intensity of the relationship with the people surrounding us in that space: whether it is the claustrophobic reaction produced by navigating through the mass of bodies on the crowded dance floor in *Crash*;<sup>2</sup> or the feeling of discovering a space by moving through it and looking around it in the *Moving Body*-series.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, both are temporal sensations to be built up over time and felt over the course of a flow—we are not after instantaneous effects. You can only grasp this when you read the image and follow that flow.





















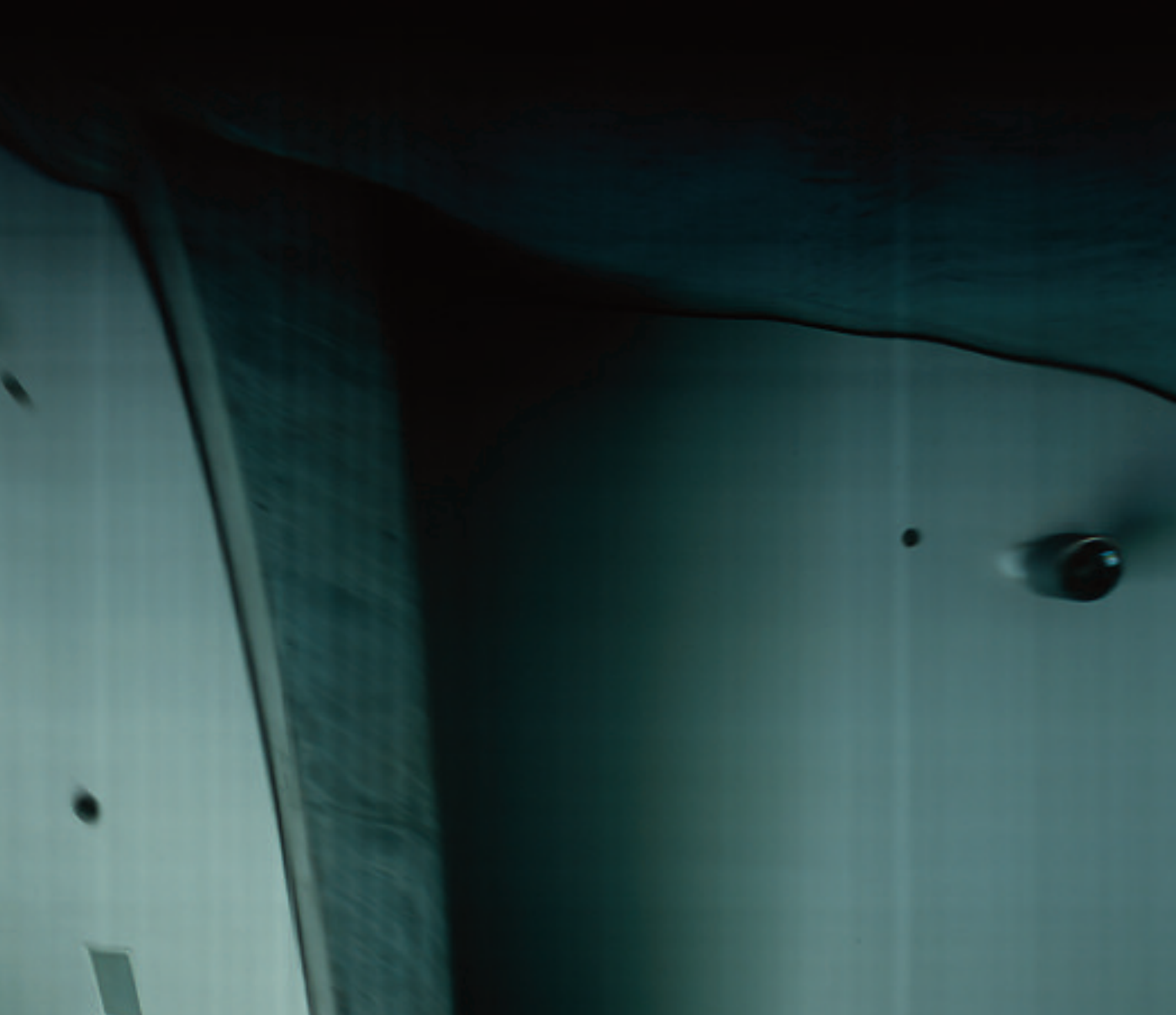












We despise the precise, mechanical, glacial reproduction of reality, and take the utmost care to avoid it. For us this is a harmful and negative element, whereas for cinematography and chronophotography it is the very essence. They in their turn overlook the trajectory, which for us is the essential value.<sup>a</sup>

In contrast to the photodynamic images of the Bragaglia brothers or any other photodynamic futurist photographer, we have adapted and explored a specific photo-mechanical technique associated with the birth of photography to expose our images.<sup>4</sup> This technique, which is best understood as a rudimentary form of scanning, enables us to turn the creation of the image into the subject of the image in its own right. So the 'act' or performance of moving the camera in space, rather than an object depicted in front of the camera, has the ability to be articulated within the resulting linear image. To appreciate this, you need to read across the expanse of our images from left to right (or right to left). Our linear images are mostly exhibited or presented in their entirety, revealing the full length of image capture. However, in the context of this piece we have sort to explore an alternative process of reading, one which seeks to provoke the feeling that something is progressing. There is a phasing of your reading, a developing rhythm, offering a temporal experience to you as a viewer. You feel that something is expanding, evolving, zooming in and out. In the representation of these images, as is encountered with forms such as the Bayeux tapestry or Chinese scroll paintings, the phasing attempts to highlight and bring to the fore, the physical activity of moving along the flow of the image sequence.

Images: a collaborative image-sequence by Jonathan Shaw and Maarten Vanvolsem

#### NOTES

a. Quotes: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, 1st July 1913, Futurist Photodynamism as published in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, ArtWorks, MFA Publications, Boston, 2001, pp. 38-45.

b. Quotes from recorded roundtable talk between Jonathan Shaw & Maarten Vanvolsem.

1. William James' (1843-1910) definition of specious-present dates from 1890. He writes, 'The short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible.' Nowadays it tends to be treated as 'The interval of time such that events occurring within that interval are experienced as present', Robin Le Poidevin, *The experience and perception of time*, in "The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy", (Fall 2000 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed), 2000, (online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2000/entries/time-experience/>) (accessed 05/2010).

2. *Crash* by Jonathan Shaw – An immersive, site-specific installation at New Art Gallery Walsall, which drew the audience into the chaotic and claustrophobic world of club culture. The gallery walls were covered in their entirety by a large scale panoramic photograph that extended throughout the full length of the gallery. The exhibition and publication featured a single image shot at *Crash*, one of the most turbulent and decadent clubs in London. The resulting experience is one of effectively becoming a part of the sea of bodies, contorted by movement and flashing lights, as Shaw invites us to travel through the throngs, witnessing the melding of flesh and faces, only occasionally perhaps finding a moment of clarity within the chaotic mass.

3. Moving-body series by Maarten Vanvolsem was started as a commission of the Concertgebouw Brugge and consists of short choreographic movements done with the camera in an architectural space. First images were published in; Maarten Vanvolsem, *Move:in:time 01:15:DD07*, Concertgebouw Brugge vzw, December 2007, on the occasion of their dance festival *DecemberDance 07* (1 till 15 December 2007).

4. This technique is the trip or slit techniques. It is used for, among other things, 360° panorama photography and the photofinish (sports timing equipment), and can best be conceived as a scanning technique. Just one line (plane) of information is recorded. By moving this line (plane in front of the lens) one builds up an area, but at the same time one creates a time-line. In other words, the camera does not expose a single frame in a fraction of a second, but records movements through a narrow slit onto moving film. With regard to any vertical line in the image, the short or long strips of photographic images always show a small section before, during and after.